

# Decline in local accent is a sign of the times

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**SOCIAL CHANGES:** Fewer people in Norwich now speak with a local accent.

When I was at school in the 1950s and '60s, at the CNS – or as it's now called, CNS – 30 out of the 32 boys in my class had been born in the Norwich area. Of their 60 parents, something like 50 had grown up in the Norwich area too.

Things aren't like that any more.

Nearly all of those 30, too, spoke with a local accent, to a greater or lesser extent. Things aren't like that any more either.

'To a greater or lesser extent'. Yes, some of us were more 'Norwich' than others. The elephant in this room is social class. Discussions of local dialects often ignore the importance of social background. Unlike in more egalitarian nations, the higher up the social scale you go in this country, the fewer regional features there are in people's accents – until you get to the top, where there are no regional features at all. You can tell our prime minister was educated at a so-called Public School, but you can't tell where he's from.

When the City of Norwich School took part in the nationwide BBC radio quiz show Top of the Form, we were as puzzled by the team selection as we were many decades later by some of Glenn Roeder's Norwich City elevens. Were these really the four cleverest boys in the school? And why did the headmaster select this boy to be school captain rather than that one?

Now I'm older and wiser, I realise what

was going on. Speaking with a local accent hindered your chances of selection. You'd be lucky to even get on the bench. The headmaster used to talk about his "better boys". If you came from Norwich, and sounded like it when you spoke, you probably weren't one of those.

The good news is that people aren't quite that blinkered any more, though we've still got a long way to go to get rid of prejudice against local accents altogether.

But the bad news is that our headmaster would have had a bigger squad to select from these days. Many fewer people in Norwich

have a local accent. East Anglian speech is on the defensive. It's gradually receding geographically.

Essex used to be East Anglian. Now most of it isn't. But our speech is receding socially too.

In modern Norwich, if you want to be absolutely sure of hearing local accents, it's no good going to Waitrose. You have to go to the Market and buy yourself some chips.

■ **Peter Trudgill is president of Friends of Norfolk Dialect.**

■ **What do you think? Email: [EDPletters@archant.co.uk](mailto:EDPletters@archant.co.uk)**